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ABSTRACT

In recent years, as students and faculty have become more involved in decisionmaking, the number of meetings of committees and subcommittees on college campuses has grown by leaps and bounds. This has led many people to believe that the amount of time and energy devoted to committee meetings is far greater than is justified in terms of accomplishments. The present study was designed to determine the amount of time spent at and the number of meetings held at Hofstra University. The data indicate that committee meetings are a very pervasive characteristic of life at Hofstra. Much time is devoted to them, particularly by administrative personnel, and they are very costly to the university. Assuming that it could be desirable to reduce the time spent in committee meetings, several suggestions are made: (1) Reduce the number of committees; (2) Reduce the size of committees; and (3) Reduce the number and length of committee meetings by having them run more efficiently. (Author/HS)

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Time Spent In Committee Meetings

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In recent years, as students and faculty have become more involved in decision making, the number of meetings of committees and subcommittees on college campuses has grown by leaps and bounds. This has led many people to believe that the amount of time and energy devoted to committee meetings is far greater than is justified in terms of accomplishments. It has also been maintained that the time spent in meetings was being taken away from the more important academic functions of teaching, learning, research, etc.

The present studies represent an attempt to get information concerning the number and amount of time devoted to committee meetings at one university, Hofstra. Two surveys were undertaken in order to get answers to questions concerning the number of hours spent in meetings.

Number of Committee Meetings.

One study was a survey of attendance at committee meetings at Hofstra University during five months, August through December of 1971. A form was sent to all members of major university committees, 64 faculty members and 61 administrators. Each individual was asked to estimate how much time he had spent in meetings and in preparing for meetings during the five month period under consideration. Replies were received from 123 persons (98.4%). One assistant dean and one faculty member did not return the form.

Data were compiled for each major committee and council at the University. The data represent the time actually spent in meetings or preparing for meetings, rather than the scheduled time. If a person did not attend a meeting, or if he came late or left early, only the time spent in the meeting was included. Many respondents said that they had tended to underestimate the number of hours devoted to meetings. Also, the month of August was included, a time when there were few meetings. Thus, the data presented probably represent minimum estimates.

Table 1 was prepared from the data that was collected. A total of nineteen different committees, subcommittees, and councils were represented. The first column indicates how many different persons

HE 003 495

actually attended one or more meetings of that group during the five month period. It excludes some persons who did not attend meetings even though they were members of the group. The second column gives the average number of man-hours per month devoted to each committee (either attending or preparing for meetings) by all of its members. This figure was obtained by summing the reported hours of all members for the five month period and dividing by five.

The most striking figure in the table is the average of 1,318 man-hours per month devoted to meetings. Assuming a forty hour week, this comes to approximately 33 man-weeks per month. There was great variation in the time spent in the several committees. Three of the nineteen groups utilized less than 10 man-hours per month, while four groups spent 100 or more man-hours per month. The Senate Planning Committee set a record by having slightly over seven man-weeks per month devoted to its activities. This was close to 40% of the number of hours accounted for by the Senate and all of its committees. The major time was devoted to meetings of the Senate and to meetings of the several advisory councils.

It is difficult to estimate the cost of the time spent in meetings. One figure, obtained by estimating an actual dollars per hour figure for each of the 123 respondents, was a five month total cost of slightly over $100,000, or approximately $20,000 per month. This is equivalent to a cost of approximately $15 per hour for the 1,318 hours per month.

Meetings of Academic Administrators.

Another study, of the time spent in meetings by academic administrators, was conducted in the Spring of 1971. At that time data were obtained from each of the nine members of the Provost's Advisory Council at Hofstra University. The members of the council are six Deans, the Provost, the Associate Dean of Faculties and the Associate Provost. The source of data was the desk appointment calendar of each of these individuals. The secretary of each council member compiled a list of all scheduled meetings that were attended during the months of February and March of 1971. Thus, these data pertain to all meetings scheduled in advance, but do not include meetings scheduled on short notice. They include meetings within a school or department as well as meetings of university-wide groups such as those discussed in the first section of this report. It was assumed that scheduled meetings not crossed out were attended. As in the first section of this report, the data pertaining to the number of hours are only approximate.

Table 1

Time Spent in Committee Meetings
August 1971-December 1971

Committee	No. of Members	Total hrs/mo
Admin Adv Council	15	140
President's Adv Council	23	69
Provost's Adv Council	9	178
University Council	25	58
University Senate	22	100
Senate Executive	12	53
Senate Curriculum	15	59
Senate Standards	20	49
Senate Standards: Academic sub	10	20
Senate Standards: Admissions	8	14
Senate Scholarship	11	25
Senate Faculty	9	82
Senate Graduate	18	52
Senate Planning	21	284
Senate Computer Center	5	7
Student Affairs	6	6
Pre Med Advisory Council	3	18
Registrar's Committee	3	2
Trustee Committees	9	94
Subtotals		
Advisory Councils	74	453
Senate	151	745
Others	12	26
Trustees	9	94
Total	246	1318

During the two month period, the nine persons surveyed were scheduled to attend a total of 347 meetings for an average of 39 per person. The number of meetings attended ranged from a low of 26 for one person (about three a week) to a high of 56 (about seven a week) for another. There was an estimated total of 730 hours devoted to these meetings during this period, an average of 81 hours per person or about 10 hours per week. Assuming that 40 hours are available for meetings between nine and five daily. (Yes, some meetings are held during lunch hour. Other meetings last after 5 PM, but this has been ignored. Nothing in this statement should be interpreted as implying that Deans work only a 40 hour week). These data show that about 25% of the administrator's work time is devoted to committee meetings.

Other data were also compiled. Meetings lasted from a short 15 minutes to a very long four hours. One person reported a seven hour meeting with his staff during this period. The mean length of a meeting was about two hours. The number of reported meetings per week ranged from one to nine; during this period no one experienced the delights of a meetingless week. There was a wide range in the average number of meetings per week reported by different individuals. Three persons reported an average of about three meetings per week, three others had an average of more than five meetings per week. The average numbers of hours per week devoted to meetings ranged from a low of six (15% of the hypothetical 40 hour week discussed above) to a high of 12.8 (32%).

The different meetings attended were analyzed in terms of categories, and the results are presented in Table 2. The data in this table indicate that the most time was devoted to meetings of the Provost's Advisory Council. Within school meetings were second, and meetings of senate committees ranked third in the total time spent.

Table 2. Number of meetings and hours spent in them

Type of meeting	Number		Hours	
	N	%	N	%
Provost's Advisory Council	95	27.4	262	35.8
Within School meetings	93	26.8	174	23.9
Senate committees	82	23.6	153	20.9
University Council	37	10.6	60	8.2
President's Council	13	3.8	33	4.5
Other	27	7.8	49	6.7

Several explanatory comments should be made regarding these data. For one thing, the figures for within school meetings are drastically understated. These data refer to the number of hours devoted to meetings such as the committees of a school, meetings of departmental chairmen, etc. Since only five of the nine participants are deans of units that have such committees, the data apply to only five ninths of the group; for the other four the time devoted to such meetings is very small. Secondly, the time devoted to meetings of the University Council is comparatively large since at that time the Council was meeting weekly, rather than once a month as at present.

Finally, data were tabulated to ascertain overlap in attendance at meetings. Three out of every four meetings held during this period were attended by only one of the nine persons who participated in the survey. One out of ten was attended by two persons. Only 5% of the meetings were attended by 8 or 9 of the members of this group.

Conclusion.

The data in this report indicate that committee meetings are a very pervasive characteristic of life at Hofstra University. Much time is devoted to them, particularly by administrative personnel, and they are very costly to the university. Thus one must ask whether the time devoted to these meetings is justified in terms of the results accomplished. This question can only be answered by those who are running the university.

Recommendations.

Assuming that it would be desirable to reduce the time spent in committee meetings, several suggestions can be made.

1. Reduce the number of committees. There has been a tendency toward proliferation of committees over the past several years. Because of the university structure there is much duplication of function, with similar committees being set up in many departments and schools as well as at the university level. There has also been a tendency to set up a special committee for every problem that arises. There should probably be a moratorium on the establishment of new committees and subcommittees together with a conscious attempt to eliminate at least 25% of the presently extant committees.

2. Reduce the size of committees. Many committees are large, usually as a result of an attempt to make them representative of all constituencies. Apparently it is assumed that

only by having one representative from each subgroup can that group be represented. Alternatives are available however. Committees could be charged to consider the needs of all groups. An efficient three or four person committee might very well perform in a fashion acceptable to the entire group. It has been proven time and again that committees consisting of only one or two persons can be both effective and efficient.

3. Reduce the number and length of committee meetings by having them run more efficiently. This can be accomplished through the careful selection and training of committee chairmen. Committee chairmen should be regularly evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in running meetings. Those persons who are not effective should be asked to relinquish their position to someone who is more effective. Committee chairmen should be selected on the basis of their specific ability to run an effective meeting, not on the basis of seniority, position within the university, popularity, or other non-pertinent characteristics.

A final word.

Implementation of the three recommendations made above would undoubtedly lead to more efficient and less costly meetings. However, what will probably happen is that a large committee will be set up to deliberate at length on ways to implement these proposals.